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A matter of choice? The implications of relaxed ratios in Early years provision

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Abstract: This position piece discusses the implications of the current UK proposals regarding the relaxing of adult to child ratios in early years settings, for children aged two years old. It is taken from the position of a private day nursery owner who also advocates for inclusive education. An exploration of the current context in terms of the 'cost of living crisis' and the potential impact on early years settings is introduced. Then a brief historical overview of Early Education development, including key policies is discussed. Finally I highlight the conflict between being a business owner, struggling with the increased costs of staffing and the ethical dilemma of still providing high quality childcare during the cost-of-living crisis.

Keywords: ratios, cost of living, funding, early years education, childcare.

Current context:

The 'cost-of-living' crisis in the United Kingdom refers to the fall in disposable incomes since late 2021 and is largely due to high inflation rates outstripping any wage and benefit increases, further exacerbated by recent tax increases and high energy prices (Insitute for Government, 2022). 87% of adults in Great Britain have reported an increase in their cost of living in August-September 2022 (ONS, 2022). This crisis has led to many early years' providers being forced to close, with at least 30% running at a loss and more expecting to be by next April (Morton, 2022).

As a private nursery owner, I have seen a decline in parents accessing childcare, with our numbers on roll reducing by 25% in the last 12 months, and yet our running costs have increased by at least 10%. We have always relied on word-of mouth to advertise our setting, never having an issue with low numbers on roll, in the last 7 years of running the nursery. One reason for the decline may be due to the increased flexibility of working hours and remote working since the lockdown measures of the COVID-19 pandemic, seeing more parents working from home or reducing their in-office hours. Another reason for low numbers may also be the increase in cost of living as described above.

One government initiative currently proposed to help ease childcare costs (for parents) is to relax the adult to child ratios for 2-year-olds from 1:4 to 1:5, with a consultation running between 4th July-16th September (DfE, 2022). In theory, this means a reduction in staff costs for settings, resulting in reduced fees for parents. However, there is a petition running until November 2022, opposing the relaxation of ratios, initiated by parents of Oliver Steeper, who died after an incident in his nursery in 2021 (Early Years Alliance, 2022).

This piece is written from the position of both a Nursery owner and a Special Educational Needs/Disability (SEND) practitioner, reflecting on the ethical dilemmas when dealing with these potentially conflicting roles. After exploring the historical developments of early education, including key policies, I focus on the real implications for childcare settings and their stakeholders, highlighting what this means for children, families and childcare staff.

Historical context:

Developmentally appropriate education was first advocated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century who said it was important for children to express themselves in order to become well-balanced and free-thinking. One of the first nursery schools in the UK was founded by Robert Owen in 1816 for the children of cotton mill workers. Key influences throughout the 19th century were Froebel and Steiner who focussed on the relationships between children and their teachers in facilitating play-based learning. In 1923 the Nursery School Association was established (now the British Association for Early Childhood Education, known as Early Education). The first president of the Association was Margaret McMillan, who laid the foundation for nursery education for all children. This was expanded during the war years, and again in the 1970's when Margaret Thatcher was education secretary. Britain also saw international educators arrive, to learn from our child-centred approach. In the 1990's, The British Council supported a programme to help China develop a more informal approach and UNICEF has supported work to help developing countries provide effective early education in line with the Framework for Action adopted by UNESCO in 2000 (Scott, 2015).

Key policies	Recommendations regarding ratios and child development:
1908: Acland Report – ‘School Attendance of Children Below the Age of Five’.	Frequent visits to the playground. Opportunities for sleep.
1933: Hadow Report – ‘Infant and Nursery Schools’.	Environment should safeguard the physical, mental and moral health of the child.
1967: Plowden Report – ‘Children and their Primary School’.	Children need individual and different attention. Individual learning. Avoid educationally harmful practices
1989: ‘The Education of Children Under Five – Aspects of Primary Education’, HMI, Department of Education and Science.	Nine areas of experience and learning for under-fives.
1990: The Rumbold Report – ‘Starting with Quality’, HMSO.	Age range in line with Children Act 1989 (up to age 7 or 8). Every child is unique. Learning should be embedded in what is familiar and should take place in a social context. Talk is central to the learning process; children need the security of a daily routine. Observation-based assessment is vital in planning an appropriate curriculum for every child. The child should feel valued, and the role of the adult is highly significant in the learning process. Ratios-a favourable ratio of adults to children is critical.
1994: ‘Start Right’, Sir Christopher Ball, RSA.	Importance of high staff: child ratios.
1998: ‘Quality in Diversity’ Vicky Hirst and the Early Childhood Forum, National Children’s Bureau.	A framework to enable practitioners to think about, understand, support and extend the learning of young children from birth to eight. Shared language for early years practitioners.
2001 onwards: Department for Education and Skills – Sure Start guidance.	Guidance including ‘Birth to Three Matters’.
2012: Early Years Foundation Stage	Every child is unique. Children learn from positive relationships, where their experience responds to their individual needs. Children develop/learn in different ways and at different rates.

Why is it so important?

"After two years of pandemic restrictions, young children need more individual care and attention than ever before - so how can the government possibly justify giving them less? And all this at a time when the government is pledging to ensure that all children with SEND get the best possible start in life too" (Early Years Alliance, 2022).

Expecting staff to support five rather than four children, including those with additional needs, puts undue pressure on them, as well as limiting opportunities for

the children in our care. The pandemic has had a lasting effect on everyone, and employers must consider the mental health and wellbeing of their staff.

“Many children are coming into early years settings with additional needs having been impacted by Covid restrictions. More children are struggling with language acquisition and with their personal, social and emotional development as a result. Therefore, now is not the time to be giving young children less support” (Gaunt, 2022).

Developing the adult-child relationships is vital within the early years, particularly amongst our two-year-olds, where language development is pertinent. Staff use open ended questions to facilitate learning and role-model good language use. Our two-year-olds are the children who have had limited early-experiences in terms of socialisation due to the restrictions the pandemic had posed. It is important that the adults involved with their education continue to implement positive relationship building as laid out in the EYFS, explained above.

Rich vs poor-potential implications

Another consideration in terms of relaxing ratios is the potential implications for families from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Poorer families may have no choice but to sign up for ‘cheaper’ childcare (with relaxed ratios) which could be a detriment to their child’s education. This conflicts with current SEND reforms that calls for high-quality education for all, especially those who are perceived as disadvantaged (Gaunt, 2022). However, this also impacts on marketisation/consumerism, by advertising that we have tighter ratios as a selling point, could give providers valid reason to charge higher prices. This gives more affluent families the choice to send their children to settings that offer higher ratios, thus widening the rich versus poor divide and the dis/advantages that come with it.

“Whilst these proposed changes to ratios would amend the existing statutory minimum requirements, providers would continue to be able to staff above these minimum requirements if that is their preference. These changes would hand greater autonomy to settings to exercise professional judgement in the way in which they staff their settings, according to the needs of their children, and help as many families as possible benefit from affordable, flexible, quality childcare” (UK Government and Parliament, 2022).

However, the government do not seem to appreciate the cost of continuing to provide a quality education, with the rise in staff salaries and energy costs, discussed earlier. The government currently provide weekly funding of 15 hours for some 2-year-olds from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Although, this funding does not cover the actual running costs of delivering high-quality education at the adult to child ratio of 1:4, which is forcing some providers to consider the proposal of relaxing ratios to save on staff wages.

Conclusion-what next?

My position as an inclusive educator is that we will still aim for existing ratios. I recognise the difficulty as a business owner in keeping costs down, but lowering ratios is not the answer. By relaxing the ratios the government are assuming we can find extra children in order to facilitate this (for instance, 10 children instead of 8). However, we have less than eight children a day currently, putting increased financial strain on the business as a whole. Even on the days we do only five children in the 2-year-old room, I would still put two members of staff in, for their wellbeing and to guarantee the quality of education our stakeholders expect. The government needs to consider increasing the funding for all 2-year-olds, thus helping to ensure high quality education for everyone.

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